AMIDST ANCIENT RUINS

By EDWARD M. SCHOENBORN, JR., Ch.E. 3

EDITOR'S NOTE: In this third article of a series, Mr. Schoenborn describes his very interesting trip to the ruins of ancient Athens.

Almost everywhere in Europe is one made to become acquainted with the past, with antiquity, with all its significant historical background, its legend and rich pageantry. Travelers must not only be initiated into a knowledge of the mysteries of the old world, but must be taught humbly to reverence the valuable heritage which the ages have handed down. We are shown this noble statue, that gigantic church, these wretched ruins. Our guide spins a thrilling historic yarn at every new scene. When he tells us the age of this masterpiece, he pauses for our expressions of awe, nods his head in a superior manner while we gasp with amazement. And if we should atrociously blunder by expressing our ignorance of the great battle that was fought on this plain in 400 B.C., or should accidentally forget that Praxiteles was a sculptor and not a character of the Iliad as we had supposed, he hangs his head in shame and in his native language mutters something seemingly distasteful. We must mourn with these people for the ages that have passed; we must burn incense of praise at altars which for centuries have been their shrines. We must worship at the monuments of antiquity.

On the morning that our ship steamed up the Saronic Gulf into the Bay of Phaleron, we instinctively felt that the gods of Athens were propitious. The day was the most delightful that had dawned for us since the beginning of our cruise. In the center of the panorama, which unfolded to our eyes lay the olive green Attic plain, swathed in sunlight and surrounded by the immortal hills of Greece. At the right rose purple Mt. Hymettus, the Mt. of Honey, famous even now as in ancient days, for the honey which the bees gather from hillside flowers. At the eastern end rose Mt. Pentelicus, white scarred and wounded as a result of the great masses of marble it had sacrificed for the temples of the gods. In the center of the plain, six miles from shore, lay Athens, a white, modern city of 350,000 inhabitants, and majestically gleaming above it the great rock pedestal, the Acropolis.

We landed at Piraeus, the port of Athens. It is dirty and bustling, typical of most Mediterranean ports. Here our guides met us with a parade of ancient Studebakers and we were driven up the new, broad, highway to Athens. Bordered with plane trees, flocks of sheep and goats grazing along the country side—this pastoral atmosphere was broken only by a very modern electric train which runs at one side.

Athens itself, its streets, its people, its gayety, held little of interest for us. We saw no characteristic costumes, no strange or apparently foreign customs to speak of, save the peculiarities of the Greek language, both written and spoken. The Greek alphabet looked curiously old and awkward in this modern setting. We began to wonder indeed if Greek was really as difficult as we had supposed it to be. So many people here knew and used it so well. Formerly when we saw a Greek text we thought always of Homer, of a Greek play, or something classical. Here, Greek was used to advertise razor blades. And as our guide casually presumed that nothing modern attracted us, we were soon speedily transported to our first stopping place for a visit to the Archaeological Museum.

In this beautiful new building are objects of inestimable value, not only for the gold and precious stones they contain, but especially for their archaeological interest. They are for the most part relics of Mycenae and date from the 14th century B.C. Vast labyrinthine rooms hold case after case of ornaments, silver and gold weapons, vessels of gold, golden masks, seal rings, and other fine objects. Others contain colossal statues, of almost every Grecian mythological figure, sepulchral reliefs and exquisite vases of terra cotta, earthenware, and various metals. In one room were some antiquities from Troy. Our guide showed us the Tomb of Agamemnon. We looked on the golden drinking cups of Helen of Troy. What a strange sensation was this! The romantic myths of Paris, Helen, and the Fall of Troy had always been somewhat doubtful history to us. And now our guides told us that we gazed upon the very possessions of these immortal figures. Surely here were some of the most beautiful, if not the oldest, man-made things that we had ever beheld.

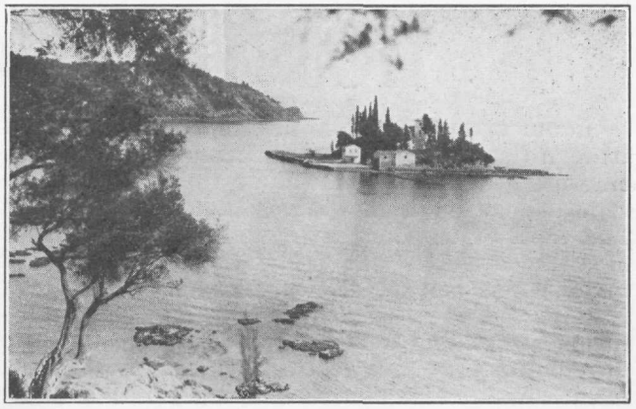
Our period of examination of all these treasures was prematurely curtailed, for we had much to see as yet and we had but a day in which to get about. We were hurried off then to the Temple of Theseus. This beautiful structure is the best preserved of all the ancient ruins and dates from the 5th century B.C. It consists entirely of Pentelic marble and has thirteen Doric columns at each side and six at each end. Parts of the reliefs of the frieze, depicting the labors of Theseus and Hercules still adorn the gables of the temple. It has served as a Greek church, later as a Turkish Mosque, and is now a Greek National Museum. We learned all this from our guide, who, by the way, happened to be a professor of history in the University of Athens, and could speak fairly good English. We examined the manner of construction of the columns, and after surreptitiously chipping off little pieces of marble here and there for souvenirs, were taken to the Kerameikos, or Ancient Burial Ground.

The Kerameikos, the principal cemetery of ancient Athens, was situated immediately outside the principal gates of the town. These are still extant as the scanty remains of the double gates, the so-called Dipylon, and marked the principal entrance to the city. Among the more renowned tombs are those of Dionysos, with the famous bull on the top; that of Demetra and Pamphile and the Stele of Hegeso which is perhaps the most beautiful of all. We learned that it was in this cemetery that excavations were soon to begin in a search for the golden statue of Athena which in ancient times held the most prominent place

in the Parthenon. Our guide informed us that a wealthy American is sponsoring the work to be undertaken there.

Passing down a narrow avenue known as the street of Lysicrates our guide pointed out to us at one end a beautiful little circular building known as the Monument of Lysicrates. The story he told concerning it is quite interesting. During the fourth century B.C. and while Athens was a the heighth of her glory, it was the custom not only to hold athletic contests such as the Olympic and other games, but even competitions in music, poetry, and drama. The victor of one of these contests received a brass tripod and was privileged to erect it anywhere in the city on a suitable pedestal. The entire street was, in ancient days, adorned with monuments of this kind. Today, however, there is preserved only this elegant little structure to commemorate the award of the tripod to Lysicrates, as the organizer of a choir of young men who won a prize in vocal music. Having been built into a convent in medieval times, it has thus been preserved as the only memorial of its kind in existence. At the opposite end of the street of the Tripods (as this street is also called), rise the remains of the Arch of Hadrian, built by this Emperor during the second century A.D. to divide the old city of Athens from his newly created Hadrianapolis. Just behind it, on the side of Hadrianapolis aspire the gigantic columns of the Olympeion, or the Temple of Jupiter. The most magnificent and one of the largest temples of the old world, its grandeur and sumptuousness now repose only in fifteen standing columns, one in ruins. Formerly surrounded by 104 Corinthian columns, and enclosing a host of gigantic statues, it was regarded as the eighth wonder of the ancient world. Its majesty is even yet reflected in the beautiful golden brown tint which the Pentelic marble has acquired through the ages. It is said that on the top of one of these columns, some years ago, dwelt a long line of hermits or stylites. A recluse would daily let down a basket and hoist up the offerings charitable visitors made to him.

Shining in the sun, forming a protective if not commanding beckground for these massive pillars, rises the Acropolis. We seemed to have been standing in its very shadow, even though it was high noon and we soon were to begin our pilgrimage up its slopes. At the Palace Hotel we ate a very mediocre dinner, impatiently and expectantly, met our respective guides again at two o'clock, and were taken back through the busy city streets, out to the very base of the citadel. As we neared our destination, saw its buildings from various angles as we turned this way and that and saw the sun's rays reflected from the marble facets, its beauty grew upon us. Not only is the Acropolis beautiful, but so is its very site, its position, and the classical atmosphere surrounding it. Rising 180 feet above the Plain of Attica, Athens kneels around its feet. It is of solid rock, over a thousand feet long and 500 feet wide, hewn flat on the top and bearing the grand remains of man's most perfectly designed structures. There are no ruins in the world, though some might be of greater proportions, some in a better state of preservation, which are as perfectly designed or are of so distinct a type, about which center so vital a history or conjure up so wealthy a portrait of immortal figures as does this marble edifice. Here was the seat of ancient Greek worship, the center of old world culture. As in the Golden Age, Greece was centered in Athens, so was the Acropolis the hub about which Athenian life revolved. Covered with shrines and statues, art museums, temples, homes of kings, abode of the gods—what an unrivalled past, these noble ruins depict!



The Island of Corfu

There is but one approach to the Acropolis and that through the Beulé gate, at its base. Entering it and climbing hastily the long flight of marble stairs, we reached the magnificent entrance to the shrine of the Goddess, the Propylaea. Once a building of spacious galleries, housing the masterpieces of the ancient sculptors and painters, it is now, through devastating warfare, reduced to but a marble foundation and a few standing columns. Together with the other buildings on the Acropolis, it is in a process of reconstruction, but work is progressing slowly. Climbing the steps which lead to the sacred precinct one steps onto the plane of the Parthenon and Erectheum. To the right apparently jutting out of the rock stands the charming little Temple of Nike or Wingless Victory. It is also constructed of Pentelic marble and measures but 27 by 18 ft. Four perfectly designed columns on either side support the architrave along which the sculptored frieze still retains in undying marble a history of the various conflicts of the Greeks. In the interior of the temple once stood the statue of the Wingless Victory, so called because victory in this form is also a manifestation of the goddess Athena. From the bastion one obtains a majestic view of the entire Attic plain. In the near foreground, amidst a clump of trees, are caves cut into the rock where, our guide told us, Socrates was imprisoned just before his death. To the right is the Hill of the Pnyx where the Athenians held their political assemblies and from which the great orators, Pericles, Aeschines, and Demosthenes delivered their immortal literary works. The Hill of the Nymphs and the Hill of the Muses also occupy prominent positions in the panorama.

On turning our backs to the little temple, we face the front elevation of the Parthenon. What a feast for the eyes it is! Crushed, broken and prostrate, this majestic ruin still stands as the greatest and most perfect contribution of man to the Spirit of Wisdom, Culture, and Freedom. An immortal monument raised to the worship of

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Athens, Goddess of Wisdom, Protectress of Athens, it is the most overwhelming relic of the ancient world. Its perfection of form is placid, classical; its beauty, pure. Its history is mingled with glory and splendor, with desecration and destruction. The building, also constructed of the marble taken from Mt. Pentilicus, occupies the site of the sixth century temple, and was completed in 438 B.C. Standing on a foundation 228 feet long by 100 feet wide, forty-six Doric columns formed the outer frame of the temple. These columns have become a beautiful golden brown in color due to oxidation of the iron in the marble, while the graceful shadows produced by the flutes, which diminish in width but not in depth as they approach the capitals add an appearance of strength and elegance. These columns, 17 on each side and 8 on the ends, bore a sample architrave, above which was a decorative frieze. The frieze sustained innumerable sculptured reliefs depicting various historical episodes. Portions of the frieze are now in the Acropolis Museum, others were removed by Lord Elgin to the British Museum. Devoted for six hundred years to the service of the goddess, it in turn became a Christian Church dedicated to the Blessed Virgin and later a Turkish Mosque for the worship of Mohammed and Allah. One could brood over this spectacle for hours. Yet one did not require the eulogies of the guide for fit appreciation. If one had no knowledge whatever of its history or purpose, it would still stand as the noblest surviving shrine of a glorious antiquity.

Not far away stands another temple to Athena Pallas and other Athenic deities, noted more for its charming porch than for the whole of its noble, though roofless, ruins. It is the Erectheum. To one side is this famous Porch of the Maidens or Caryatids as it is called. All six of these lovely, though lonely maidenly creatures replace the usual columns and gracefully support upon their heads, the roof of the portico. Can one ever forget the charming conversation that Richard Halliburton had with these images, in a dream, the night he slept in their shadows? No wonder Flora did not speak to him—she had gone to the British Museum with Lord Elgin some few years ago! And we have not yet learned for sure that they gave him their right names, even though their manner of meeting him was extremely informal.

Though we are fain to linger among such impressive shrines, our guide continued on. Then, climbing back down from this grand stronghold we at length found ourselves on the west side of the Acropolis, looking down into the Odeion of Herodes Atticus. Named after the wealthy benefactor who built it, the Odeion was intended for all kinds of musical and dramatic performances, and could accommodate about five thousand spectators. Once covered with marble and adorned with beautiful statues, it is now, like all the rest, but a dramatic ruin. Far more celebrated than the Odeion, and perhaps the most famous of all theatres of ancient Greece is the classical theatre of Dionysos. As our guide talked we strode upon the stage on which the great poets Aeschylos, Euripides, Sophocles, and Aristophanes presented

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their immortal days, or rested in the marble chairs reserved for the priesthood of the Temples. It is said that this auditorium accommodated about 17,000. This theatre too is in a wretched state, but still retains a touch of beauty in its sculptured marble chairs, and in the elevated stage adorned with stolid Satyrs and Sileni.

Returned to the ship, and moving away from the purple hills, one cannot help but look back on the Acropolis, feel its intellectual majesty, and dream of the "Grandeur that was Greece." Nor yet can one fail to compare with it and hence regret, the ruin of so majestic a city. And one cannot help but recall with Byron as he too beheld the scene, the immortal words of Shakespeare:

". . . *Man, proud man,*
Drest in a little brief authority—
Plays such fantastic tricks before high heaven
As make the Angels weep. . . ."